DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 057 FL 019 718

AUTHOR DeLancey, Scott
TITLE Cross-Linguistic Evidence for the Structure of the Agent Prototype.
PUB DATE Jul 90
NOTE 8p.; In: Papers and Reports on Child Language Development, Number Twenty-nine. California, Stanford University, 1990. p141-147.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Concept Formation; Contrastive Linguistics; *Grammar; *Language Acquisition; *Language Processing; Language Research; Linguistic Theory; Self Concept; *Tibetan

ABSTRACT

A discussion of agency looks at cross-linguistic evidence concerning the place of volition, animacy, and person in a model of agentivity. Two views of agentivity are presented as complementary rather than mutually contradictory. Data from Lhasa Tibetan that support a less restrictive notion of agency than is often assumed are presented. In this approach, neither animacy nor volition is an essential part of the definition. Evidence suggesting a much more restrictive notion of agentivity. in which the prototypical Agent is not only human and acting volitionally, but is also first person, is offered. It is proposed that agentivity can be defined as the first identifiable cause of an event, and that this is the basis of the elaborated agentive prototype in which volitionality figures. It is concluded that the Tibetan data suggest that agentivity is experientially based, but the full agentive prototype can be experienced only subjectively. This evidence for the relevance of person to the agent prototype is seen as being of particular interest in light of acquisitional evidence that predication of speaker agentivity appears earlier than attribution of agentivity to others. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PRCLD 29 (1990)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED338057

Cross-linguistic Evidence for the Structure of the Agent Prototype

Scott DeLancey
University of Oregon

Much work on the study of case roles in general, and of agentivity in particular, has suffered from an inflexibly deductive approach. There is a tendency to approach any problem related to agentivity or its syntactic reflexes with a preassumed semantic model, involving, in particular, volition (however defined) and humanness or animacy as criterial features of agentivity. Morphosyntactic facts which appear to be inconsistent with this model regularly emerge, no matter what language is being investigated.

The correct line of investigation requires an inductive approach to determining the semantics of agentivity. While an a priori notion of what it is to "be an Agent" may be appropriate for philosophical investigations, we as linguists must be concerned with those semantic categories which are reflected in the morphosyntax of language, or of some particular set of languages, and any attempt to construct a model of this category must involve induction from linguistic facts. In this paper I will briefly review some cross-linguistic evidence concerning the place, in a model of agentivity, of volition, animacy, and person.

Let me begin by stating several assumptions which underlie the argument presented here. First, case roles are semantic, i.e. they have semantic content. An understanding of the role of agentivity in syntax must be based on an understanding of the cognitive structure which is indexed by agentive morphosyntax. Like other semantic categories, agentivity behaves, in terms of its linguistic expression, like a prototype category, that is, there is evidence for degrees of agentivity.

The semantic content of the Agent category is intensional. Agentivity is not an objective phenomenon of the real world; it is a relation which can be predicated of particular participants in particular reports of particular events. An argument "is" an Agent only in a particular clause; it makes no sense to say, without reference to a particular clause, that some entity in some event objectively "is" or "is not" an Agent.

The only relevant evidence for the semantics of case roles is linguistic evidence. That is, we identify agentivity by its morphosyntactic stigmata, not by a priori notions of what "real" Agents act like in the real world. So, for example, if we postulate that a NP in the *by*-phrase of an English passive is Agent, then *the wind* in *A lot of trees were blown down by the wind* is an Agent, and there's no sense getting into a lot of arguments about why it isn't a "real" Agent--in that clause it is a real Agent. (Note the lack of a corresponding ??*The door was opened by the key*.)

The claim that the Agent category behaves as though it had a prototype structure implies that one should be able to find linguistic

FL019718

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Eve Clark
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

evidence for both more and less restrictive definitions. I will present data which support a less restrictive notion of agency than is often assumed, one in which neither animacy nor volition (however defined) is an essential part of the definition. I will then present some evidence suggesting a much more restrictive notion of agentivity than is normally accepted, in which the prototypical Agent is not only human and acting volitionally, but is first person as well. It is perhaps not needless to say that I present these two views of the nature of agentivity as complementary rather than mutually contradictory.

Animacy and volition

In several papers (DeLancey 1984a, 1985a, 1990) I have adduced evidence that the in model of agentivity which has the most general morphosyntactic relevance Agent can be identified with the ultimate identifiable cause (cp. Langacker 1986). This is what distinguishes Agents from Instruments. Compare:

1) A bomb damaged several pieces in the Renaissance Collection.

2) ??? A hammer damaged several pieces of sculpture.

Both examples have inanimate subjects, which according to received case theory means that *A bomb* and *A hammer* cannot be semantic Agents. This should entail that both will have the same morphosyntactic behavior with respect to constructions to which agentivity is relevant--such as the subject slot of a transitive predicate such as *damage*. But this is not the case. While (1) is an unexceptionable example, of a sort often adduced to show that English allows Instruments to be transitive subjects, (2) is decidedly peculiar, and could be said only in rather marked circumstances.

I have argued that the Instrument as subject interpretation of such examples is incorrect, and that in fact eligibility for transitive subject status normally requires some degree of agentivity (DeLancey 1984a; cp. Schlesinger 1989). The acceptability of (1) is due not to *A bomb* being an Instrument and thus eligible for subject status--an explanation which leaves the oddity of (2) unexplained--but rather to the fact that *A bomb* is in fact an Agent, i.e. an ultimate cause, rather than an Instrument, i.e. a mediating cause. This is because the explosion of a bomb can be--indeed almost must be--imagined without any other Agent in the picture, while an event of damage done with a hammer cannot be so pictured. Thus, IN THIS CLAUSE, the bomb is presented as the ultimate cause. While we may infer the likelihood of an anterior cause in the form of a more orthodox Agent, the event can be pictured, and described, without including any such participant. An event involving a hammer cannot be so pictured, and will not be so presented. This is the reality underlying the common imprecise assumption that an inanimate

entity such as a hammer "must" be an Instrument and "cannot" be an Agent.

It has been often suggested that split intransitive marking reflects agentivity more directly than most grammatical systems, with subject-marked intransitive subjects identifiable as Agents (e.g. Fillmore 1968:53). Various phenomena connected with specific split intransitive systems have been adduced as problems for this approach. Some of these should be discussed as diachronic phenomena, not directly relevant here. For this discussion we can restrict our field of interest to productive fluid-split S systems, where the case marking is clearly sensitive to semantic distinctions related to agentivity. Let us consider one class of problem discussed by Rosen (1984): that of bodily-process predicates such as 'cough' and 'fart'. These are anomalous in having their subjects marked in some languages like transitive objects, suggesting that they are patients, and in others like subjects, suggesting that they are Agents. This is problematic on two grounds. First, assuming an objectivist view of semantics in which a given entity in a given event type either "is" or "is not" an Agent, we would expect all languages to agree on the characterization of all arguments of all event types. Secondly, this class of predicates doesn't fit the general a priori view of agentivity, in being typically non-volitional.

An adequate understanding of agentivity and its syntactic expression should then allow us to answer the following questions:

> What are the determinants of intransitive S case marking in these systems?
>
> Why is there cross-linguistic variation in the case marking governed by certain predicates?
>
> Why is this variation associated with these particular categories of predicate?

Lhasa Tibetan has a particularly transparent split intransitive system which provides evidence for answers to these questions. (The argument is developed at greater length in DeLancey 1985a, b, 1990.) The following examples show the pattern, typical of fluid split intransitive marking, in which volitionality is not relevant to case marking of transitive actors (ex. 3), but is criterial for case marking of arguments of intransitives (exx. 4-5):

3) nga-s dkaryol bcag-song
   I-ERG cup broke-PERF/NON-VOLITIONAL
   'I broke a cup (inadvertently).'

4) nga-s rtsig-pa-'i sgang-nas mchongs-pa yin
I-ERG wall-GEN off-ABL jump-PERF/VOLITIONAL
'I jumped off the wall (deliberately).'

5) nga(*-s) rtsig-pa-'i sgang-nas gzags-byung
I wall-GEN off-ABL fell-PERF/1st GOAL
'I fell off the wall (inadvertently).'

All three predicate a change of state in the referent of an argument of the verb. What sets the first two off from the third is that the ergative-marked argument is the direct cause of the event. And as I have already argued, this is the fundamental component of agentivity--agentive morphosyntax is always used to identify a primary causal factor of some kind. What is criterial here is that this causal factor be separable from the actual event. This is easy to see in the case of the transitive example; the Agent is clearly distinct from the change of state in the patient. But the same argument cannot be applied to a volitional intransitive. In the intransitive examples, volitionality is criterial. This is assimilable to the "separable cause" interpretation if we treat volitionality as representing a decision, or act of volition, on the part of the actor, which is then a causal event distinct from the extensional event referred to by the predicate. Schematically:

(DECISION-->) ACT -------> EVENT
(cup breaks)

DECISION ----------------> EVENT
(actor off wall)

In the 'fall' case, in contrast, the event is represented in the clause as having no antecedent cause.

Then we can explain the cross-linguistic variation in the treatment of bodily process predicates in the following way. Consider a predicate such as 'sneeze', which in Lakhota, for example, takes a subject-form argument, but in Lhasa Tibetan takes an unmarked object-form argument. Such events are easily conceptualizable as external events, distinct from the individual in/from whom they occur. This is why in many languages many of these predicates tend to be cognate object verbs. Then there are two perspectives which one might take on an event of this kind. Viewed objectively, the sneeze can be seen as emanating from--i.e. caused by--the sneezer, in exactly the same way as an indubitably agentive event such as a shout. But from the point of view of the sneezer, the impulse to sneeze is a visitation from somewhere else, not originating in a decision--and thus the sneezer plays an Experiencer role. Lakhota encodes the first representation of the event, Lhasa the second.

Agentivity and person

Thus far I have been casting a wide net, following morphosyntactic evidence in extending the application of the notion of agentivity to situations where many linguists would be disinclined to invoke it. But there is cross-linguistic warrant as well for a more restricted, more traditional view of agentivity--which is, of course, precisely what we would expect of semantic categories with a prototype structure. There is cross-linguistic evidence for the relevance of the widely-claimed components of volitionality and animacy, although not so much nor so clear as is often assumed, and considerable and clear evidence also for the widely-assumed though not so often demonstrated relevance of transitivity (see e.g. DeLancey 1984a, 1987). I want to briefly discuss one other factor not often mentioned, that of person.

General cross-linguistic evidence for an interaction between person and agentivity is found in split ergative or inverse-type systems in which notionally transitive clauses with 3rd person Agent and 1st or 2nd person patient are morphosyntactically marked with stigmata of intransitivity--a phenomenon observable in some Salishan, Wakashan, Tanoan, and other languages (Jelinek and Demers 1983, Emanation 1988, and see brief discussion in DeLancey 1987). Probably related is the phenomenon reported for Tsova-Tush (Batsbi), a split-intransitive language in which only 1st or 2nd person intransitive subjects can be marked as Agents (Desheriev 1953, Holisky 1987; cp. DeLancey 1981).

An important clue to the interpretation of data such as these is found in a system occurring in modern Tibetan and certain related languages (discussed at greater length in DeLancey 1984b, 1985c, 1990). In these languages verbal morphology reflects the volitionality attributed to the actor in the event, but only in statements with 1st person, and questions with 2nd person, actors (data from Lhasa Tibetan):

6) nga-s dkaryol bcag-pa yin
   I-ERG cup broke-PERF/VOLITIONAL
   'I broke the cup (deliberately).'

7) nga-s dkaryol bcag-song
   I-ERG cup broke-PERF/EVIDENTIAL
   'I broke the cup (inadvertently).'

8) kho-s dkaryol bcag-song / *-pa yin
   s/he-ERG cup broke-PERF/EVIDENTIAL / *VOLITIONAL
   'S/he broke the cup.' (volitionality cannot be indicated)

I cannot elaborate the argument here, but it can be shown that this is fundamentally an evidential phenomenon--volitionality can only be indicated for first person, because the speaker can have direct knowledge of volitionality only for herself.

I have already suggested a definition of agentivity as the first identifiable cause of the event. A volitional action represents the most elaborated possible version of a causal schema. That is, in the case of accidents, emotions, unexplained events, etc., the causal chain is open at one end; the causation of the event is not adequately explained. In a volitional action, a satisfactory primary cause is identifiable. I suggest that this is the basis of the elaborated agentive prototype in which volitionality figures.

The Tibetan data suggest the plausible hypothesis that agentivity, like many other semantic categories, is experientially based, in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson 1980. But the full agentive prototype can be experienced only subjectively; the Tibetan data show that volitionality can be evidentially asserted only of the speaker, and can only be inferred for other Agents. In this respect it is parallel to subjective emotional states, which in Japanese, for example, can similarly be evidentially predicated only of the speaker, and can be predicated of others only with inferential marking (Watanabe 1984). This evidence for the relevance of person to the Agent prototype is of particular interest in the light of acquisitional evidence that predication of agentivity of the speaker appears earlier than attribution of agentivity to others (Budwig 1989).

References

Budwig, Nancy. 1989. The linguistic marking of agentivity and control in child language. *J. Child Lang.* 16.263-94.

DeLancey, Scott. 1981. An interpretation of split ergativity and related patterns. *Lg.* 57:626-57.

_____. 1984a. Notes on agentivity and causation. *Studies in Language* 8.2:181-213.

_____. 1984b. Transitivity and ergative case in Lhasa Tibetan. *BLS 10.*

_____. 1985a. Agentivity in syntax. *CLS Parasession on Agentivity and Causation.*

_____. 1985b. On active typology and the nature of agentivity. pp. 47-60 in F. Plank, ed., *Relational typology.* Berlin: Mouton.

_____. 1985c. Lhasa Tibetan evidentials and the semantics of causation. *BLS 11.*

_____. 1987. Transitivity in grammar and cognition. pp. 53-68 in R. Tomlin, ed., *Coherence and grounding in discourse.* Philadelphia: Benjamins.

_____. 1990. Ergativity and the cognitive model of event structure in Lhasa Tibetan. *Cognitive Linguistics.*

Desheriev, Junus. 1953. *Bacbijski jazyk.* Moscow: Nauka.

Emanation, Michele. 1988. The Nootka passive revisited. pp. 265-91 in W. Shipley, ed., *In honor of Mary Haas.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Fillmore, Charles. 1968. The case for case. pp. 1-88 in E. Bach and R. Harms, eds., *Universals in linguistic theory.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Holisky, Dee Ann. 1987. The case of the intransitive subject in Tsova-Tush (Batsbi). *Lingua* 71.103-32.

Jelinek, Eloise, and R.A. Demers. 1983. The Agent Hierarchy and voice in some Coast Salish languages. *IJAL* 49.167-85.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Langacker, Ronald. 1986. Settings, participants, and grammatical relations. pp. 1-31 in S. DeLancey and R. Tomlin, eds., *Proc. of the Second Annual Meeting of the Pacific Linguistics Conference*. Eugene: Dept. of Linguistics, University of Oregon.

Rosen, Carol. 1984. The interface between semantic roles and initial grammatical relations. pp. 38-77 in D. Perlmutter and C. Rosen, eds., *Studies in Relational Grammar 2*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press.

Schlesinger, I.M. 1989. Instruments as agents: on the nature of semantic relations. *J. of Linguistics* 25:1.189-210.

Watanabe, Yasuko. 1984. Transitivity and evidentiality in Japanese. *Studies in Language* 8:2.235-51.2.